

## Editorial: Not Your Parents' Comics; or Maybe They Are

MUCH ADO HAS BEEN MADE RECENTLY ABOUT THE MATURITY AND sophistication of the contemporary comic book (or graphic novel, the preferred term). And there is good reason for this sudden critical recognition. The film release of Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta* sparked conversation about the comic's (and the movie adaptation's) ability to lampoon the neo-fascist tendencies of British/American governments by featuring a terrorist hero who blows up buildings. This is heady and controversial stuff for a post-9/11 world, and perhaps can be done effectively *only* in the comics medium. Just like the apocryphal Aesop of the sixth century BCE, who was able to tell children's fables critical of the "powers that be" without drawing direct and hostile scrutiny from the government to his moralizing, *V for Vendetta* was able to blast away at emotionally charged issues also without drawing direct and hostile scrutiny from the government to its moralizing.

But, the groundwork for *V for Vendetta* has been prepared by others in the past, and extends to the present and into the future. The front page of the "Weekend/Life" section of *USA Today* for Friday, April 14, 2006, for example, announced that Marvel Comics will be releasing a new seven-issue miniseries entitled *Marvel: Civil War* (about how the government wanting to impose a "Super Hero Registration Act" proclaims superheroes as "living Weapons of Mass Destruction"), which explores questions of individualism and civil liberties in America. DC Comics' 2004 miniseries *Identity Crisis* (writer Brad Meltzer and artists Rags Morales), is about the murder of the wife of a superhero called Elongated Man, and the subsequent ambiguous ethical dilemma raised in the story by the conflicting ideals of fairness and justice and the need for security.

Tracing the ancestry of such sophisticated work in a so-called kiddies' entertainment medium reveals immediate ancestors, including

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Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series, both eloquent deconstructions of mythology and the superhero. Then there is Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, a comic's retelling of the Holocaust with cats representing the predatory Nazis and mice representing victimized Jews. There are many other examples, and many more contributions. In the early 1970s, DC Comics published a cross-over series in the comic book *Green Lantern*, which paired the superheroes Green Lantern and Green Arrow. Written by Dennis O'Neil and illustrated by Neal Adams, the liberal Green Arrow engages in a type of political dialogue with the establishment Green Lantern about various social issues in America, such as racism.

Social consciousness in the comics, I would argue, goes back even further. The Marvel Comics' line of the early 1960s, written by the prodigious Stan Lee and illustrated by such great artists as Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko, introduced a "personal" dimension to the concept of the superhero. Larger-than-life characters such as Spiderman, the Fantastic Four, the Hulk, and the X-Men encountered their fair share of everyday "normal" problems, ranging from adolescent angst to social acceptance. And the trail does not end even here. The grandparents and archetypes of the superhero, DC Comics' Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman, each made their contributions to our social and moral consciousness in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Their origins speak to substantive American concerns: Superman (Clark Kent) as the iconic immigrant, Batman (Bruce Wayne) as the victim of violent crime, and Wonder Woman (Princess Diana) as the empowered woman.

So, you see, comics have *never* been *just* for kids, and though the medium today is receiving its much deserved critical recognition for its use of creativity and social commentary, your parents' comics were pretty cool too, speaking in significant ways to the child in the adult, and to the adult in the child.

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